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Articles in Today's Clips

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Friday, June 16, 2006

Legislators say law not being followed in Ricky's slaying probe

They say access denied to secret files in case of boy's death while in care of state welfare system.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

LANSING -- The children's ombudsman for the state should be free from control by the governor in order to truly protect the interests of children, some state leaders told a legislative committee on Thursday.

The House Special Committee on Child Protection was appointed to investigate whether the state Department of Human Services could have done more to prevent the murder of 7-year-old Ricky Holland, whose adoptive parents, Tim and Lisa Holland, will face trial in September in Ingham County Circuit Court.

Lawmakers still don't have access to confidential case files to investigate deaths of children in the state welfare system, even though they're entitled to the information under a law passed in 2005, according to testimony Thursday before the committee.

Former state Rep. Lauren Hagen, who wrote "Ariana's Law," said the law is not being carried out as intended -- and the children's ombudsman should be free from control by the governor. The ombudsman, who is appointed by the governor, is charged with investigating complaints in the state's child welfare system.

But the committee's investigation has been stymied because both DHS and state Children's Ombudsman Verlie Ruffin have refused to turn over Ricky's records.

"(Under Ariana's Law) it's up to the ombudsman to provide this information to the Legislature, without question," Hager said. "The bureaucratic power structure hides behind (confidentiality laws). The Legislature can't be told they can't have the information they need to do their job." Ruffin did not return a call for comment on Thursday afternoon.

This is the first time lawmakers have tried to investigate such a case under "Ariana's Law." But state officials and the ombudsman have stated that they cannot release the information while the case remains under investigation by the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office.

Ricky was adopted through the state foster care system, as were his siblings Joseph, 4, Kathryn, 3, and Sam, 2. The couple also has a daughter, Allison, 1, who was not adopted.

State child protection workers were aware that Ricky and his siblings were being abused, but did not remove them from their home, according to court documents.

Senior committee member Rep. Barbara Vander Veen, R-Allendale, said lawmakers should change the system.

"The only way to get that ombudsman to not be afraid (to turn over records) is if they're independent," Vander Veen said. Liz Boyd, spokeswoman for Gov. Jennifer Granholm, said the governor would not support changes in the ombudsman's office.

You can reach Karen Bouffard at (734) 462-2206 or kbouffard@detnews.com

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Detroit Free Press

TRENTON: Dad is cleared of abusing his baby daughter

The father of a baby who was battered so badly that her injuries likely will last her lifetime has been acquitted by a Wayne County Circuit Court judge.

Ryan Popilekc, 25, formerly of Trenton, was found innocent of charges of first-degree child abuse and assault with intent to commit murder by Judge James Callahan on Tuesday. Callahan waited until Thursday to discharge the jury in the case, to give the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office time to appeal the judge's directed verdict clearing Popilekc of all charges. No appeal of the acquittal is possible.

Popilekc had been charged with abusing his daughter, Mianna, in January after he and his wife took the child to Oakwood Southshore Hospital in Trenton for being uncontrollably fussy and having blood in her stool.

The child, who turned a year old this month, was found to have both old and new bleeding in her brain and doctors concluded she had been abused.

"They know what happened, they just don't know who" did it, Popilekc's attorney, Stephen Boak, said Thursday.

There are as many as half a dozen adults who had access to the child during the period when she was injured, Boak said.

Popilekc, a truck driver, always maintained his innocence.

Boak said his client was relieved that the charges were dismissed and that he still wants to be a father to his daughter.

A divorce is pending, as well as a child protective proceeding in the juvenile division of Wayne County Circuit Court.

Dad says he 'lost it' in daughter's death

Friday, June 16, 2006

By John Agar

The Grand Rapids Press

GREENVILLE -- As her young son grows up, Melissa Kosten cannot imagine how she will explain that his father killed his 5-month-old sister.

She doesn't understand how Jeremy Gribben, 23, could kill their daughter, Brianna, in their Greenville home last fall. Gribben had no explanation, either.

"I don't know why all this happened," Gribben told a judge on Thursday.

"I did not mean what happened," he said, turning back toward the gallery.

"I'm not a bad person; I'm nice to everybody. I don't know why this all happened. I didn't mean for it to happen. I'm sorry."

Gribben was sentenced to at least 26 years in prison after he pleaded no contest to second-degree murder in the Thanksgiving Day death.

He told family that he "lost it" when he injured the girl.

Montcalm County Circuit Judge David Hoort said he appreciated Gribben's apology and remorse, and understood he didn't intend to kill the girl. But, he said, "It's also clear that you are responsible for what happened."

He sentenced Gribben to 26 to 50 years in prison.

After the hearing, Kosten, who declined to speak in court, said "I don't think he got enough time out of this. He should have to spend the rest of his life (in prison)."

Her family has said that Brianna was injured by shaking. Kosten said Gribben hasn't given any real reason.

She was gone when her daughter was injured and returned to find her on the floor.

Her daughter -- she called her "Peanut" -- "liked to jibber jabber all the time," she recalled. She will "never get over losing her," but she said she has to stay strong.

"I have a son to worry about right now," she said.

Two preteen boys will face juvenile charges in assault of girl, 13

By KORIE WILKINS

The Oakland Press

Web-posted Jun 16, 2006

ROCHESTER HILLS - Two of the four boys accused of assaulting a 13-year-old girl in a Rochester Hills park will be in court next week, officials say.

Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor Keri Middleditch said her office wrote juvenile petitions for two of the four boys, charging them with misdemeanor assault and battery. The boys, both 11 and from Rochester Hills, will be before Oakland County Juvenile Court Referee Joseph Racey on Thursday.

"That will be their first court appearance," Middleditch said.

Neither boy has an attorney.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said he is glad the process is moving forward. He said he has been in communication with parents in the area on the issue.

"These parents had a lot of concerns," he said. "So we certainly appreciate the prosecutor moving forward with efforts to protect children in the area.

"We hope this ugly behavior won't rear its head again."

Middleditch said the other two boys, both 9, will not face charges because of their ages. She said she could not give many details on the case because it has not yet been publicly presented in court.

"These charges were the most appropriate," she said.

The assault made headlines in April.

According to authorities, the girl - who lives in Shelby Township - was playing with her 11-year-old sister in Bloomer Park in Rochester Hills on April 17 when she was assaulted by the boys. The girl, who was not physically harmed, was able to get away and run to her mother's car, which was nearby.

According to the girl, she and her sister went to a playscape in the park and there were five or six boys nearby.

The girl was on the upper level of the playscape when one of the boys approached her and tried to give her a hug.

He put his hand on her breast and she slid down the slide to get away from him.

Officials say that before the girl could run away, several of the boys jumped on her and held her down while they grabbed her buttocks and breasts. One of the boys reached under her shirt and grabbed her breast.

Authorities say one of the boys was encouraging the other boys to keep molesting the girl. After the incident, the boys ran away.

Middleditch said she didn't know what kind of penalties the boys could face.

She said the juvenile system is focused on rehabilitating offenders and keeping the public safe, as opposed to the adult system, which focuses on punishment. If the boys had been charged as adults, they would be facing 93 days in jail.

As juveniles, Middleditch said the boys could face detainment in Children's Village, counseling or community service.

"We try to look at everything in these cases, including the child's background," she said.

Health care an emphasis at women's commission

Tony Lascari, Midland Daily News

06/15/2006

Midlander Jill Wilson expressed her concerns about the state's health care programs Wednesday to a commission on women's issues.

Wilson said she struggles to make co-payments required under Medicaid and wants health care to be affordable for all people, including as part of new programs proposed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

"In the long run the cost for prevention, to treat it right off, is less than the cost of hospitalization later," Wilson said.

She said having medical coverage has allowed her to gain an education and care for her three children, and she wants to make sure the same opportunities are available for mothers in the future.

Jackie Doig, a staff attorney at the Center for Civil Justice in Saginaw, said Granholm's Michigan First Health Care Plan, proposed in the State of the State address, needs to be meaningful so it actually benefits people and not just health care providers.

A different proposal being discussed by the Legislature would eliminate eligibility for about 45,000 people on Medicaid, she said.

"We should be decreasing the number of people without health care, not increasing it," she said. Pam Yager, policy advisor in the governor's office, said the governor's program would focus on covering people below 200 percent of the poverty level, who make up about half of the state's uninsured. Details of what the health care plans would look like are still being developed and the governor is gathering public input right now, Yager said.

"We're talking with everyone about how we can make all of this work so it's affordable to everyone," she said.

She said it they expect it to cost close to \$1 billion to cover those below 200 percent of the poverty level who are uninsured.

The governor's plan also would promote healthy lifestyles and advance health information technology to save money in the long run, she said.

Gloria Woods, Michigan Women's Commission vice chairwoman and the representative from Bay City, said the commission takes the input received at its meetings and look at forming positions to advocate in state government.

The group is called to study the status of women in Michigan, direct attention to women's issues, recommend methods to overcome discrimination and more.

"It's also a forum for people to hear about what other people are talking about," Woods said.

"Unfortunately, women's issues are undervalued in many arenas. Here they are not."

The commission has 15 members appointed by the governor and ex-officio members from the state government.

Other speakers at the event at Saginaw Valley State University discussed ergonomics and workplace injuries involving women; advocated for breast feeding rooms at businesses, where a new mother could pump breast milk in a private, sanitary space; and shared their view about the need for access to affordable contraceptives.

Jurors to begin deliberations in Unger murder trial

By JOHN FLESHER

Associated Press Writer

Jun 16, 7:53 AM EDT

BEULAH, Mich. (AP) -- After eight weeks of impassioned arguments and conflicting testimony, Mark Unger's fate lies with a Benzie County jury that will decide whether his wife was murdered or suffered a fatal accident.

Jurors were to begin deliberations Friday after receiving final instructions from Circuit Judge James Batzer.

Attorneys wrapped up closing arguments Thursday after firing salvos at each other's cases and pleading with jurors to base their verdict on common sense.

"You haven't seen any kind of evidence worthy of a criminal charge," defense lawyer Robert Harrison said, adding that the case against Unger belongs "in the trash can of this courthouse." Assistant prosecutor Mark Bilkovic said Unger's guilt had been proven beyond a reasonable doubt. "He knows it," Bilkovic said, pointing a finger at the defendant. "Show him with your verdict that you know it, too."

Unger, 45, of Huntington Woods, is charged with first-degree murder in the death of his wife, Florence Unger. The 37-year-old woman, who had been seeking a divorce that her husband fought, was found dead in Lower Herring Lake on Oct. 25, 2003. The couple and their children were on a weekend trip to the Watervale resort, about 50 miles southwest of Traverse City. In arguments lasting much of the day, Harrison hammered at the prosecution's claim that Unger knocked his wife off a boathouse rooftop deck to a concrete slab 12 feet below and later dragged her unconscious body into the lake's shallow edge, causing her to drown.

"He would not or could not kill anyone, least of all this woman that he loved so much," Harrison said.

The prosecution, he said, was portraying Unger as "a monster" who, as his wife lay dying, returned to the family cottage and prepared their young sons for bed while coolly plotting to finish her off.

"Hannibal Lecter in 'The Silence of the Lambs' couldn't even do that," Harrison said. "It is outrageous to suggest that anybody could destroy the life of the mother of these children and act like that. It's outrageous and absurd, and it's a lie."

It might be hard to believe a man could do such things, Bilkovic responded.

"Unfortunately, in our society outrageous things happen. ... Husbands kill their wives. Husbands with children kill their wives. Husbands who have been rejected by their spouse and do not want the relationship to end kill their wives."

Harrison urged jurors not to settle on a compromise verdict by convicting Unger of second-degree murder instead of first-degree murder.

"Murder is murder," and a guilty verdict on either count would be equally devastating to Unger and his family, Harrison said.

Jury to weigh Unger murder case

Mike Martindale / The Detroit News

BEULAH -- Closing arguments in a Huntington Woods man's murder trial concluded Thursday with a prosecutor holding up for a Benzie Circuit Court jury two photographs of Florence Unger: one of her smiling into the camera, the other of her lying in the morgue.

Mark Unger, 45, is on trial for first-degree murder in the October 25, 2003 death of his wife, Florence, 37, at a northern Michigan resort.

Defense attorney Robert S. Harrison ripped into the prosecution's case as "red herrings" and "the worst kind of circumstantial evidence" and unloaded on the Benzie Circuit Court jury with his explanations of what happened.

The jury has been hearing the case against Mark Unger since April 26.

"My point to you is anyone can go in the wrong direction if they are given wrong information," Harrison told the jury of eight men and seven women. " This case was in the trash can of the courthouse before it was even started. There are a number of questions that can't be answered fully -- on both sides.

"But unproven means not guilty. And you cannot possibly convict Mark Unger without making an awful lot of guesses on things."

Investigators believe Florence Unger fell from a 12-foot high boathouse deck during an argument over the couple's pending divorce and that Unger then dragged his wife's unconscious body into Lower Herring Lake to make the death appear to be an accident. Harrison said Mark Unger was asleep in a nearby cottage with his two sons when his wife accidentally fell to her death.

Harrison portrayed Mark Unger as a non-violent man who had successfully battled drug and gambling addictions and was struggling to hold his failing marriage together with a weekend getaway to Watervale when the tragic accident happened.

The dead woman's mother, Claire Stern, quickly left the courtroom when the defense attorney described Florence Unger's two-year affair with a neighbor. Mark Unger could be seen dabbing at his eyes with a tissue as Harrison described how his client had been kept in the dark about the relationship he described as "the best kept secret in Huntington Woods."

But attorneys differed on what prosecutors called possible "trigger points" in the case. Among them:

A pending divorce: In August 2003, Florence Unger filed for divorce. Four days before her death, she and her attorney met with Unger over how Mark Unger's gambling and drug addictions would be made public in any custody battle for their two sons. She also wanted to know about his gambling and rehabilitation expenses. Mark Unger hoped for reconciliation, Harrison said.

The lover : Glenn Stark, the ex-neighbor, testified of a two-year affair and of being sexually intimate with Florence Unger a few days before her death. Stark testified the Unger household was so tense during a visit he asked if he should leave and Mark Unger replied: "Why? You're not the one divorcing me." Harrison described the affair as the "best kept secret in Huntington Woods" and said even Mark Unger did not learn of it until after her death.

Fear of the dark : Mark Unger told police he left his wife alone on a boathouse deck to check on their sons in a nearby cottage -- which would have been unusual if she had a fear of the dark. When he returned and found her gone he went back to the cottage and fell asleep until morning. Florence Unger's life-long fear of the dark was recalled by her father, brother and friends. Yet Harrison noted other close friends said weren't aware of any such phobia.

The railing : An aged, wooden deck railing has been the focus of much testimony. Defense experts said it was at least 10 inches below code height and was an "accident waiting to happen." The prosecution contends Florence Unger was punched or kicked over the railing.

A packed SUV : Unger's 1999 Ford Expedition was packed up before some investigators were even on scene. Unger was advised by friends not to make any statements and to leave with his sons. Investigators said hours after the discovery of Florence Unger's body, Mark Unger never asked how his wife died or tried to remove her from the lake. Harrison countered Mark Unger tried to take her out of the lake but was overcome with grief.

Pathologists : Three pathologists testified that Florence Unger's injuries suffered in the 12-foot fall caused death. A fourth, Oakland County Medical Examiner Ljubisa Dragovic, opined she would have died from injuries but was first placed in the lake by someone. Only Wayne County Medical Examiner Carl Schmidt believed she could have rolled into the lake on her own or due to movement caused by seizures. Schmidt also said it was possible she drowned.

Bloodstains and injuries : The center of a blood stain on the concrete was 33 inches from the seawall and consistent with someone who likely laid there unconscious, bleeding from skull fractures for up to 90 minutes, pathologists testified. An internal bruise to the stomach was consistent with blunt force trauma, as if the dead woman had been punched or kicked, one doctor testified. Her pelvis was also fractured, making independent movement even more unlikely. Defense experts said if she laid there that long, much more blood would have been found.

Computer animation : A retired MIT professor offered five theories explaining accidental death -- three of which were shown to jurors. Dr. Igor Paul noted the railing was well below the woman's center of gravity and she either could have leaned, fallen or walked into it and to her death. Paul based his calculations on autopsy and state police reports. Some found such graphics compelling; prosecution attorneys dismissed them as nothing more than "cartoons" which ignored evidence such as bloodstains covered by a blue comforter.

The police video : A state police video showed Mark Unger could not have seen his wife's body until he was almost next to it. Yet witnesses testified that when he heard she was found, he ran 300 feet directly to her position in the lake. The defense countered Mark Unger was at a higher elevation than the camera and simply ran toward where he had last seen his wife.

Blue comforter : Florence Unger was last seen wrapped in a blue comforter, which later was found lying on the concrete pad near where police suspect she hit the pavement. The comforter covered blood-stained concrete. The prosecution contends if she had rolled as a defense witness theorized, there should have been more blood on the blanket. The defense said the comforter could have dropped down after the body rolled into the lake.

Life insurance : Mark Unger was named as beneficiary in two policies totaling \$750,000. The defense countered that the policies were purchased six years before Florence Unger's death and that Mark Unger removed himself as a beneficiary after her death.

Statements : The defense stresses Mark Unger has been consistent in accounts to police, friends and family about what happened the night before she was found. He told several police, relatives and family that he when he returned to the deck his wife was gone so he went to bed. Only one witness, a hairdresser, testified when she called Mark Unger the day after the death, he told her he had checked on Florence twice on the deck and she was "fine."

Attorneys even argued about two video rentals Mark Unger made: a children's film, "Scooby Doo," and an adult comedy, "Anger Management." Unger has said he went back to the cottage and watched the videos with his sons and fell asleep. The "Anger Management" tape was never found at the cottage and the seven-day rental was not returned to the store until two weeks later, special assistant state attorney general Mark Bilkovic pointed out on rebuttal at day's end.

"There's no proof Unger took "Anger Management" with him," said Bilkovic. "If Mark Unger had practiced anger management we wouldn't be here today over Florence Unger."

Judge James M. Batzer is expected to give jurors instructions before they begin deliberations.

You can reach Mike Martindale at (248) 647-7226 or email mmartindale@detnews.com

Unger defense: An accident

In closing arguments, prosecutor points to evidence of marital discord

Mike Martindale / The Detroit News

BEULAH -- A defense attorney for a Huntington Woods man charged with his wife's 2003 death told a Benzie Circuit Court jury Wednesday that a botched investigation and a series of misunderstandings ultimately led to his client being charged with first-degree murder.

Attorney Robert S. Harrison's client, Mark Unger, 45, is on trial in his wife's Oct. 25, 2003, death at a northern Michigan lakeside resort.

Harrison is expected to conclude his closing arguments before the Benzie Circuit Court jury today, to be followed by prosecution's rebuttal and Judge James M. Batzer's instructions to the jury for both first-degree and second-degree murder.

A jury heard closing arguments from the prosecution and defense attorneys Wednesday. It will decide Unger's innocence or guilt in the death of Florence Unger, 37. She was found floating face down in Lower Herring Lake at the Inn of Watervale resort, about 10 miles south of Frankfort.

Harrison has maintained Florence Unger's death was a tragic accident that happened without any involvement by his client. Harrison said police investigators initially responded to a possible suicide call, then immediately investigated the death as a homicide despite the "death trap" of a faulty railing on the boathouse deck from which Florence Unger fell.

"They searched him, his car, took his clothes and put him in a paper suit," Harrison said. "He can't do anything. He can't even cry without someone saying that was wrong. When he gets down on his hands and knees to retch, they think it's all fake because they thought they caught him red-handed in a lie."

During the seven-week trial, Harrison and the defense team called experts and witnesses to convince the jury of eight men and seven women of several possibilities that a rotted, deteriorated railing may have attributed to her fall from a 12-foot high boathouse deck. And that once she struck the concrete, she likely rolled into the lake or to the edge of the seawall where seizures could have moved her body the remaining inches over the edge. Harrison told the jury that a "botched investigation" was conducted by inexperienced Benzie County Sheriff's deputies and Michigan State Police detectives, who showed up at Watervale that morning and failed to file proper reports, secure the death scene or do routine tests on the body.

Harrison also lectured the jury on a defendant's presumption of innocence.

"The protection is there unless removed by evidence, evidence which you believe is so strong that it is beyond a reasonable doubt," he said.

Donna L. Pendergast, assistant Michigan attorney general, gave a three-hour presentation to the jury in which she discussed marital discord and unusual behavior by Mark Unger. She said common sense and all the evidence in the woman's death points in only one direction -- directly at Mark Unger.

You can reach Mike Martindale at (248) 647-7226 or mmartindale@detnews.com

Unger trial defense rests case

Deliberations begin today for Benzie Co. jury

June 16, 2006

BY FRANK WITSIL and STAN DONALDSON

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

State prosecutors have no "real evidence" to prove that Mark Unger killed his wife, defense attorney Robert Harrison repeatedly told a Benzie County jury during his closing arguments Thursday.

Harrison said that the prosecution's medical experts didn't agree on the cause of death, there wasn't a clear motive, and just because Unger didn't immediately shed tears after hearing of his wife's death doesn't mean he killed her.

"Nobody," Harrison said, "should be judged and called a criminal because of how he acts on the day when his wife has died, his children are motherless and the police are pointing the finger of guilt at him."

The defense and prosecution have rested, and now, Mark Unger's fate rests in the hands of that jury, which is to begin deliberating today.

What it believes about how Florence Unger died could determine if the Huntington Woods man is found guilty or acquitted of murder.

Did Florence Unger die from hitting her head on a concrete slab after falling from a wooden deck?

Did she die by drowning in the Lower Herring Lake?

Or was the 37-year-old's death an accident?

For nearly two months the jury has heard and seen evidence presented by Assistant Attorney General Donna Pendergast and Harrison.

Unger, a father of two, is accused of killing his wife in October 2003 by forcing her over the railing of a 12-foot-high deck and drowning her in a nearby lake. The family had gone there for a weekend getaway.

Unger, a former radio sportscaster, is charged with first-degree murder. The jury has the option of finding him guilty of first-degree murder or second-degree murder -- if they believe his wife's death was an accident -- or acquitting him.

On Thursday, the prosecution and defense tried to leave the jurors with some parting words. For most of the day, Harrison repeatedly told the jury that the prosecution has no evidence to prove its case, and line by line went over court testimony that he said bolstered his argument that Florence Unger's death was an accident.

Harrison argued the police investigation of Florence Unger's death was compromised, and hinged on what detectives perceived as suspicious behavior on behalf of Mark Unger -- such as crying without tears and quickly changing emotions.

Mark Unger, who did not testify, has repeatedly said outside of court that he had nothing to do with his wife's death. Harrison portrayed Florence Unger as someone who was troubled the last week of her life because she was having an affair with a former neighbor, and friend of her husband, Glenn Stark.

Stark testified during the trial that he and Florence had sex a week before she died. As Harrison talked about the affair, Mark Unger was in tears and Florence Unger's mother, Claire Stern, left the courtroom.

Harrison said Unger loved his wife and children, and could not have possibly killed her and then gone back to the rented cottage where the Ungers were staying with their two young boys and kissed them goodnight, as prosecutors claim. And, Harrison said, it defied common sense for Mark Unger to be on the deck at the Watervale resort with his wife, introduce himself to a stranger, and then commit a murder.

"You'd have to be stupid or nuts to kill your wife at that moment," Harrison said.

Special Assistant Attorney General Mark Bilkovic, however, said in the prosecution's last words to the jury that Unger was a self-centered man who supposedly loved his wife so much that he left her alone in the dark all night and never went to look for her, or check to see if she came home until the next morning.

"The defendant is guilty of murder," Bilkovic said. "He knows it."

Bilkovic showed the jurors the puffy blue comforter Florence Unger took with her onto the deck, and which was found near her body.

He showed them photographs of her smiling face and her lifeless corpse. He reminded them of Mark Unger's drug and gambling addictions, the divorce he and his wife were going through, the troubles that the couple were having that week, and the \$750,000 life insurance policy that he stood to collect upon his wife's death.

And he told the jurors that they are the "truth finders" who will have to determine "who is telling the truth and who is not."

Contact **FRANK WITSIL** at 248-351-3690 or fwitsil@freepress.com

Jobless claims lowest in 4 months

But labor market has shaky outlook

June 16, 2006

BY MARTIN CRUTSINGER

Published Detroit Free Press

WASHINGTON -- The number of newly laid-off workers filing claims for unemployment benefits fell to the lowest level in nearly four months last week, but the decline was viewed as overstating the strength in the labor market.

The Labor Department reported that jobless claims dropped to 295,000 last week, a decrease of 8,000 from the previous week. It marked the second straight week that claims have fallen, pushing the total to the lowest level since the week of Feb. 18.

Michigan had the biggest drop, a fall of 11,280; followed by California, where claims were down 6,122 because of the holiday-shortened workweek, and Georgia, where claims fell by 2,242 because of fewer layoffs in the textile industry.

The state data lag the national figures by one week. Even with the two-week improvement, economists are still looking for the labor market to gradually weaken in coming months, reflecting a slowdown in overall economic growth.

Signs of that slowdown have already shown up in the surprisingly weak increase of 75,000 new payroll jobs in May -- 100,000 below what economists had expected.

Analysts said businesses have started to trim their hiring plans in response to signs that the economy is slowing under the impact of rising interest rates, surging energy prices and a cooling housing market.

The next step after trimming hiring will be layoffs, a development that would start to push unemployment benefit claims higher. Analysts said they expect to see that occur in coming months.

In the week ending on June 3, jobless claims had dipped by 34,000, reflecting in part the Memorial Day holiday, which meant that state claims offices were open one less day to accept benefit applications.

In that week, Louisiana was the only state reporting an increase of more than 1,000 claims while nine states reported declines in claims applications of 1,000 or more.

Jobs outlook among best in nation

By Dan Meisler

DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Originally published June 13, 2006

Livingston County's job outlook for the third quarter is one of the best in the nation, according to a survey from Manpower Inc., an international employment services company.

But the job markets in surrounding counties — where the majority of Livingston residents work — have a much more dismal outlook.

Half of Livingston County employers surveyed plan to add workers between July and September this year, and none are expecting to lay people off, according to Manpower.

Tom Bovee, a regional director at Manpower's Howell office, said about 55 Livingston County companies were surveyed.

The 50 percent of companies planning to add employees was up from 23 percent for the second quarter. "It's a real positive outlook," Bovee said.

According to a press release accompanying the survey results, "the Livingston County employment outlook is the ninth best in the nation."

The survey found that 50 percent of county employers surveyed plan to add workers during the next three months; 47 percent expect to maintain current staffing levels; and three percent reported not knowing.

That compares to 10 percent of employers in the southeast Michigan region planning to add staff, and 25 percent statewide.

Local officials said the survey was good news, but warned that some sectors of the economy are not humming along very well.

Pat Convery, president of the Howell Area Chamber of Commerce, said the survey results were "great" and "phenomenal." But it may not reflect the reality in some sectors, she added.

"I'm hearing good things from the retail sector and service sector," she said. "I'm hearing not-good things in construction and real-estate sales ... there are obviously some segments that are really overriding the bad news."

Building permits for new homes have been in a slump since last year, according to data from the county Building Department.

On the other hand, the Green Oak Village Place mall in Green Oak Township could bring 1,100 jobs, according to a presentation from developers to the county Board of Commissioners last year. The mall is scheduled to open late this summer.

Bovee said the firms surveyed in Livingston County come from all sectors.

Bill Sleight, head of the Howell MichiganWorks! office, said the Manpower survey "follows trends we've been seeing."

"We've certainly seen, since the first of the year, the number of employed county residents increase," he said.

Sleight said that figure has gone up 2 percent since January.

But considering that so many county residents commute to work in other counties, does this latest survey data really reflect the economic health of Livingston County? Census figures from 2000 show 57.5 percent of Livingston County workers commute to jobs outside the county, mainly in Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne counties.

Only 8 percent of employers in Oakland County said they plan to add jobs; 13 percent of those in Wayne County; and 7 percent in Macomb County. Washtenaw job-growth figures were not available.

Bovee said the data may indicate a reversal of the commuting trend.

"If it's creating opportunity in Livingston County, some folks may have the opportunity within this market not to commute," he said.

Sleight said preliminary data is already starting to show that more people who live here are working here.

"We also know that a lot of people who work outside of the county prefer to work here," he said.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
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MARIANNE UDOW
DIRECTOR

News Advisory

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

Kent County officials announce child support debit card program at June 19 news conference

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Grand Rapids – The Department of Human Services' Office of Child Support, in cooperation with the Kent County Friend of the Court, is now disbursing child support payments electronically. A new state law requires all child support payments to be electronically disbursed via direct deposit into either a personal checking/savings account or to a debit card.

Officials from the Michigan Department of Human Services Office of Child Support and the Kent County Friend of the Court will talk about this new program during a news conference on Monday.

The news conference will take place **Monday, June 19, 2006 beginning at 10:00 a.m.** It will be held in the **third floor conference room at 82 Ionia Avenue, N.W.** (two blocks south of the Courthouse in Grand Rapids).

Speakers at the event will include:

- Marilyn F. Stephen, director of the DHS Office of Child Support.
- John Cole, Kent County Friend of the Court.
- Honorable Paul J. Sullivan, Chief Judge Kent County Circuit Court.
- Andrew L. Zylstra, Kent County DHS Director.
- Senator Bill Hardiman
- Senator VanRegenmorter (invited)
- Representative Jerry Kooiman
- Representative Michael Sak
- Representative Glenn Steil

Many Kent County residents have chosen to receive their payments via direct deposit to their bank account, while others will receive theirs via the new VISA debit cards. These cards can be used like any other bank or credit union debit card at any location that accepts VISA debit cards - without incurring any fees. Customers can also get cash back with purchases from any of over 29,000 merchants in Michigan – again without fees. Customers choosing to access debit card funds using an automated teller machine (ATM) will be subject to ATM fees.

For more information on electronic disbursement of child support go to the child support section of the DHS Web site, www.michigan.gov/dhs or to www.misdu.com.

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